

“Open-eyed Patriotism”  
July 6, 2025

Proverbs 11:14  
Psalm 33  
Hebrews 11:1-3

It is good to be back in this pulpit and, again, I thank Craig and Ann and Bob for so ably filling it during my sabbatical time.

The events of the past month and the votes of the past week are reverberating all around us as this weekend we the people of the United States begin to mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our independence.

So much happened in my time away:

Our own Senator Ernst blithely discounted the harm of cuts in funding for health care by reminding us that we will all die.

The National Guard was activated to quell protests in Los Angeles and the Marines have been called in to help ICE in Florida, where the latest response to immigrants is something called “Alligator Alcatraz.”

The father of three Marines was beaten and detained by masked ICE agents. An Iranian woman who has been in the United States and regularly checking in with immigration authorities for nearly half a century has also been detained. And a 20-year-old soccer player from West Liberty was detained when he went to his annual check-in with immigration authorities last week. Masked secret police are pulling people off the streets.

A state legislator in Minnesota was assassinated.

Iran was bombed.

After our president, who once said he knew just what to say to the president of Russia to end their invasion of Ukraine, talked with Putin on the phone, Russia unleashed a record air attack on Ukraine.

Israeli soldiers and private American contractors have been firing into crowds of hungry Palestinians who had posed no threat.

And after using an antisemitic slur during his visit to Iowa on Thursday, on Friday the President signed a bill that will increase our debt, take healthcare and SNAP benefits from millions, and provide great benefits to those who have great wealth.

Yes, there were the lively No Kings protests and the Pride Parades here and across our nation.

But many are experiencing a strong desire to look away from all these distressing events. So the Bezos wedding provided a distraction for most of the past month.

And I've heard of some who decided to forego any Fourth of July observances this year—finding little celebrate in our troubled nation.

And yet, while we might want to close our eyes, as people of faith we must not look away from the challenge that authoritarianism is presenting to our nation.

In this context, it might have seemed strange or even troubling for us to cry out with the Psalmist: “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord!” This psalm is often used in a self-congratulatory manner. Hearing some people talk, you’d think that the ancient Hebrew poet had the United States of America in mind when those words were written.

Listen closely. The Psalmist sings, not of national greatness, but of the forgiving grace of God. This grace is the “real power behind illusions of power.”<sup>i</sup> The nation whose “God is the Lord” is also the nation that recognizes that a ruler is not saved by a great army; a warrior is not delivered by great strength; and that the war horse is a vain hope for victory. This is not a support system for encroaching authoritarianism.

In July of 1776 Thomas Jefferson would write, “All Men are created equal,” In March of that year, Abigail Adams, however, wrote to her husband John: “Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could,” concluding: “That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute.”

The tyranny of King George was thrown off. Now, as our nation begins its semiquincentennial year, our experiment in democracy is threatened. We are confronted again with the reality that all men would be tyrants if they could.

We are helped, then, by the short lesson from Proverbs that we heard this morning: “Where there is no guidance, a nation fails.” Or as the King James Version translates: “Without a vision, the people perish.”

Our national story reminds us of the importance of guidance and vision, of what we see and what we fail to see.

The writers and signers of the Declaration of Independence affirmed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” They attested to truths that were plainly visible: equality, rights that cannot be taken away. Anyone, it would seem, could see these realities.

Of course, to many, it was not self-evident that enslaved people were created equal or that they had an unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Nor was it self-evident that white women, poor people, and indentured servants were also endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, as they, too, were variously denied life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Nothing in the Declaration of Independence is legally binding. But it provides something as important as the rule of law. It provides the vision for us as a nation. It gives us an identity as an American people to guide us in the way we might go if we so choose.

That vision was not fully seen by everyone in 1776. Limited vision meant that countless people perished without knowing the freedom that was declared.

But in increasing numbers over time—enough people were able to see what should have been self-evident to all. Enough people caught the vision of the equality of all people so that those words have continued to prod and challenge, continued to inspire and encourage us in our evolving 250-year struggle for freedom and equality.

We fought a Civil War, we marched for women's suffrage, we faced jail and injustice and violence and murder, we debated and voted and petitioned and protested out of the faith that is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

We keep coming back to the life-giving guidance of the Declaration of Independence and its self-evident truths, that Abraham Lincoln called “a rebuke and a stumbling-block to tyranny and oppression.”

In “American the Beautiful” we sing of “patriot dream that sees beyond the years...” This as-yet unrealized dream is the hope that looks forward to a new age when God will wipe away every tear. This as-yet unrealized dream is the love of a flawed country that seeks the best for the nation and its people. The vision of self-evident truths, of rights held by all people invites us to open our eyes and to raise our sight beyond what is so that we can move toward what might be.

So, it is good for us as well to join our voices with others in “Lift Every Voice and Sing”—a song that reminds us the road of freedom and equality is not easily traveled.

It is “a way that with tears has been watered.”

It is traveled by those “treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered.”

This is a song that grew out of the African American experience, which it describes honestly as “bitter.” James Weldon Johnson and his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, nearly forgot that song after they wrote it in 1900 for a celebration of Lincoln's birthday in Jacksonville, Florida. But the children who sang it kept singing it and sharing it with other children and in twenty years' time it spread throughout the South.

Many are still on the stony road—and patriot dreams must look closely at what is in order to continue walking under the guidance of the vision of freedom.

How is it that we are true to God and to our Native Land in these days?

We open our eyes and face current reality.

American exceptionalism must give way to a recognition that we are one in a world of nations, aware of the power that we hold and its potential for abuse as well as its many benefits.

The love of country leads people to make great and valuable sacrifices as soldiers and as civilians. At the same time, in pointing out what he called the “paradox of patriotism,” Reinhold Niebuhr observed that patriotism transforms individual unselfishness into national selfishness. He warned that unqualified loyalty to the nation “is the very basis of the nation's power and the freedom to use that power without moral restraint.”

There are many problems with patriotism.

And yet, with its problems there is possibility in patriotism as well.

William Sloane Coffin said: “There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.”<sup>ii</sup>

Patriot dreams call for justice in the land.

God calls us to acts of mercy and compassion.

We are not living up to such callings.

While appreciating the freedom and equality that we do see, we need to be aware of our lack of vision and the danger to ourselves and our nation when we miss self-evident truths.

Our sight is often poor.

So let us seek to be open to the guidance and the vision without which we will fail and perish.

John Adams wrote: “I am well aware of the Toil and Blood and Treasure, that it will cost Us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States. —Yet through all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory. I can see that the End is more than worth all the Means.”

In this anniversary year ahead of us, let us look up, look beyond and celebrate and give thanks for the toil and blood and treasure that allowed this nation to take our first steps to freedom, for the toil and blood and treasure that secured that freedom for all people, and for the toil and blood and treasure that continues to allow this imperfect nation to move forward in freedom.

Let us look and find strength in the events that we mark this weekend. Let these days be another step along the way of reclaiming the promise of this nation for all people. In the days ahead may we continue to see and seek this nation’s good.

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<sup>i</sup> “Psalm 33,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*

<sup>ii</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, quoted by Donald Shriver, *America*, July 2, 2007